DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 941 FL 018 923

AUTHOR Rahilly, Leonard J.
TITLE Which Culture Shall We Teach?
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 15p.; In: Proceedings of the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communications for World Business and the Professions (8th, Ann Arbor, MI, March 30-April 1, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Administration Education; Business Communication; *Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Education; *Cultural Traits; Curriculum Development; Educational Needs; Foreign Students; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; *Languages for Special Purposes; *Relevance (Education); Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Social Values; Study Abroad

ABSTRACT

While language programs often include a cultural component as a requirement for language majors or as an option for other students, there is little agreement about the design of a civilization component for serious programs in languages for business. Although the traditional approach to cultural education is valid, a curriculum focusing on contemporary civilization carries more immediate meaning for the business language student. Defining the contemporary makeup of a foreign nation can be difficult and risks stereotyping, but may be approached by attempting to define national values and social forces. Some of the ways that programs in languages for business and the professions can develop interesting, informative, and stimulating courses include the use of the following: (1) the existing pool of international students as classroom resources; (2) foreign films as a medium for cultural study; (3) books that give overviews of the politics, education, values, and attitudes of another culture; (4) foreign newsmagazines and newspapers; and (5) study abroad. (MSE)

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Leonard J. Rahilly
Department of Romance and Classical Languages
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1027

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Which Culture Shall We Teach?

It is a cliché among language teachers that knowledge of other cultures is essential to understanding them, and that the study of foreign languages is one of the best routes to the understanding of foreign cultures. It is therefore common for full-fledged language programs to include a cultural component as a requirement for language majors or as an option for other interested students. Some professors whose interests tend more toward the teaching of literature than of languages consider literature itself to be a vehicle for the understanding of a foreign culture; most will admit to the desirability of extending the study of culture to include an appreciation of the artistic, architectural and musical heritage of a nation. Traditional language programs may offer a brief introduction to the contemporary life of a foreign nation in courses with titles like "Contemporary French Civilization" or "Contemporary Spain". In these courses an attempt is made to acquaint students with the recent history, politics, and educational system of a nation, in an effort to bring a glimmer of understanding to students who, all too frequently, are completely ignorant of any aspect of life in a foreign nation. In some language programs, civilization

is considered the study of the art, architecture and music of other nations. In either case, I suspect that these courses are often poor orphans in departments where literary studies predominate.

Colleges and universities which are considering the institution of a serious program in languages for business and the professions will probably be considering the inclusion of a civilization component, but there may not be unanimity of opinion among the members of a faculty as to what face to put on this part of the program. In this paper, I will propose that for the purposes of programs in language for business and the professions, should it be necessary to make a hard-and-fast choice between the traditional approach to culture and the study of contemporary civilization, the latter should take precedence over the traditional art-architecture-music approach. I hasten to add that I do not for a moment suggest that art, architecture and music are invalid subjects for study, but I consider them as having more meaning for students who have first applied themselves to an understanding of the contemporary life of the nation which they are studying.

Traditional language departments sometimes pay lip service to the idea that present-day students study languages for purposes other than to read Balzac or Voltaire. The modern student is likely to say outright that he studies a language for totally practical reasons--so that he may backpack around Europe, or so that he will have an added advantage when he seeks

employment in a large multinational corporation or international bank. At the same time that the language student sees a practical value in language study, he may be only dimly aware of the value of cultural studies, or of how he might approach these studies. Many American students, perhaps most Americans, have little understanding of the differences between nations, and may not understand the need to learn about foreign cultures. It behooves those of us who are involved in the establishment of programs to think seriously, then, about what it is that we want to teach our students and in what order we teach it.

Let me enlarge upon a remark I made above, to the effect that literary studies and traditional art studies are inappropriate intructions to the study of culture: I do not suggest that the study of literature is an invalid means to the understanding of another civilization, but my experience suggests that most undergraduates do not have the intellectual baggage to extract cultural lessons from literature; it is my opinion that a solid background in the civilization of a foreign nation will make the later study of its literature infinitely easier and more meaningful. By the same token, I do not consider that most undergraduates can easily extrapolate an understanding of a foreign culture from art, music and architecture alone; these will be better understood after students have made a serious attempt to understand the contemporary makeup of a foreign nation.

If we accept the premise that contemporary civilization is the point of departure for any cultural component of a language program, we immediately run into a major difficulty, and that is how to decide what it is we want to teach, how to define, in fact, what I have just called the "contemporary makeup of a foreign nation." All of us who have, at one time or another, taught civilization courses, have had to ask what it is we are teaching, and indeed, if we can convey to our students what makes up the essence of a foreign culture. Sanche de Gramont, in his charming and perceptive book called The French, tried to address himself to the problem of defining his own nation (Gramont is now that rarest of Frenchmen, an expatriate who has taken up with the Anglo-Saxons, becoming an American citizen and changing his name to Ted Morgan). Gramont addresses himself to the problem of national definition in his introduction:

> I began by asking myself the most obvious question, Why is a Frenchman not a German or an Irishman? But to approach national character head on seems as risky an enterprise as hunting for the unicorn. As Antisthenes said, I have known such and such a horse, but I have never known horseness. I wanted to avoid the sterotypes that have been thrust upon us since the Bible lumped together as incorrigible revelers all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Are there no virtuous Gomorrheans, no lazy Germans, no placid Spaniards, no hot-blooded Swedes, no

teetotaling, dull-witted, unpatriotic and puritanical Frenchmen? If there is a French volksgeist, or collective soul, it is not in Caesar's description of the Gauls as irascible and brave, quick-tempered and undisciplined, nor in the observations of the debarking Englisman at Calais about the smell of the Continent, nor in the familiar cutouts like short plump Dupont, sitting in the Café du Commerce in front of a glass of wine, smoking a ricepaper Gauloise and making over the world. The statistical approach seems equally unrewarding. Does it help to know that France has more washing machines with centrifugal dryers than any other Common Market country, that 53 percent of French housewives like to cook or that 13 percent of the male population uses deodorants?

But a number of factors can be studied to help isolate the compound called Frenchness. "The millions of men who compose a nation," said Jean de La Bruyère, "find themselves assembled on a common soil to speak the same language, live under the same laws, and agree on common customs, usages, and beliefs." The French occupy an area colored green in my atlas, with borders and terrain features. They speak a language distinguishable from other languages, which French writers have used to compose a literature. They obey (or disobey) the same laws, and are ruled over by and

overthrow the same governments. They recognize certain events as forming their history, and some of these events are reinterpreted to contribute to a sense of national kinship.

The past is a lesson to be learned and a legacy to draw from. France is atavistic in the sense that the same diseases tend to recur after a lapse of several generations.

The French can also be examined through the different forms of exchange that allow any society to survive--the exchange of words, on which education, culture and the mass media are founded; the exchange of money and goods, which keeps the economy going, and the exchange of women, which keeps the species going.

Finally, there is a common frame of reference by which the nation's inhabitants know one another to be French. It is not revealed by the study of physical appearance or personality traits, for there again one falls into the stereotypes such as the bon vivant anarchist or the rationalist-libertine. It is a fund of data acquired by being raised in a country, knowledge less learned than absorbed through the pores as well as the mind: a mixture of proverbs like "Long as a day without bread" and trademarks like the Michelin-tire man, sermons and travelogues, prohibitions and platitudes, menus and metro tickets,

> the inbred notion of a certain way things are done and said. The Frenchman is not someone who possesses a navy blue passport and speaks the language of Descartes, but someone who knows who broke the Soissons vase, what happened to Buridan's donkey, why Parmentier gave his name to a hash, and why Charles Martel saved Christendom (10-11).

There is no doubt that a such a definition of what constitutes a civilization is open to debate, as are Gramont's very views on what makes a Frenchman a Frenchman, especially as Frenchness or Italianness or any other -ness are elusive qualities when one seeks to define the life of a nation. And, of course, any definition of the way of life of an entire people is immediately open to the charge of stereotyping. Most of us would undoubtedly resist an attempt to stereotype us as "typically American", raising the objection that our individual differences make it impossible to mold us all in the same way. Yet, upon reflection, we could certainly find a great many things we hold in common with the majority of Americans, and we could, if asked, provide a foreigner with any number of ways in which we ourselves identify what it is that makes us American: the way Americans view and treat one another in society; commonly-held views on sexual roles, and indeed, on sexuality itself; the viewpoint of the citizen toward civic duty and toward the political process in his country (I have been in more-than-one nominally democratic whose citizens have a "what-can-I-do?"

attitude toward the actions of their government--a notion completely foreign to most Americans, who believe, and rightly so, that they can influence their government and who attempt to do so as a matter of course). We might ask how our nation views tradition, knowing that tradition may be viewed differently in different societies: for some it may be a sacred font of values, while for others it may be a stumbling block in the path of progress. And, we might ask, what are our national symbols and what emotional values do they hold for many members of our society?

If once we decide that an attempt to invade the collective psyche of a nation is the appropriate path for our teaching of contemporary culture, our attempt to define what it is that makes us American will provide us with a point of departure in our attempt to define other nations. All of us who have spent appreciable time abroad can recount incidents or events which we consider illustrative of our understanding of how the citizens of other nations approach life, love, politics and, perhaps, the rest of the world. This makes for an essentially anectodal approach to a foreign culture, and any attempt at a synthesis of the information acquired by this approach will result in truisms and stereotypes: Foreigners viewing <u>us</u> might observe that baseball and football are typically American and that, indeed, these sports provide many metaphors in the American language; they might say that Americans work too hard and have trouble understanding the value of leisure, and, of course that they

value Mother highly, at least in the abstract; Protestantism would be seen as a dominant force in American personal and political life; and an astute observer could see that Americans retain an idyllic nostalgia for the land, although few of them actually live on and from the land. Foreigners observing the French might conclude that Frenchmen seem to understand the concept of leisure, but may not take work to be a central value in quite the same way that the Germanic nations do. Outsiders viewing the English would probably find them to be still attached to social distinctions, and, of course, reserved. One could endlessly collect such anecdotal clichés, and most of us who teach foreign languages and cultures could provide from our own experiences anecdotes illustrative of truisms about the citizens of other nations. But, while anecdotes and truisms add salt and spice to culture courses, it must be apparent that something more than this is needed to constitute a program from which our students can take meaningful information and food for thought.

While the intent of this paper is to to encourage the inclusion of contemporary civilization as a major component of any program of language for business and the professions, I might suggest here some of the ways in which we could make up interesting, informative, perhaps exciting and stimulating courses for our students:

Universities and colleges having a substantial body of foreign students have a ready-made pool of individuals who can be invited to speak to civilization classes, where they could be

asked to talk not only of their own countries but of what they have seen in America that strikes them, offends them, excites them, and why that is so (Americans need to hear how their culture, which seems so natural and right to them, may not be viewed as perfect from the perspective of the citizens of countries as close as Canada or as far away as China).

Foreign films are a natural medium for the study of other cultures, although they must be used with caution; they are always subject to interpretation by teachers or critics who are knowledgeable about the nation from which the film emanated: it may be that that elusive Frenchness of which we spoke earlier is present in a French film, but it is likely that most unprepared students could not find it. Unfortunately, it is all too difficult to find here the films that are seen by average people in foreign countries. More often, it is the films of notable directors whose films make the art circuits in this country. These films are not infrequently self-consciously innovative, and may not be as appropriate as a point-of-departure for cultural discussion as the more run-of-the-mill films shown to typical audiences at home.

Textbooks that attempt to give overviews of the politics, education systems and commonly-held values and attitudes of other cultures may provide a useful structure for a course, and may suggest topics for further study and discussion. Such textbooks might be supplemented with any number of other books, from the scholarly to the popular, which have been written in recent years

about life in foreign countries, many from the first-hand experiences of the authors (journalists and writers, in a number of cases). A cross-section of readings from these books would give not only useful information but provide topics for fruitful discussion. As a sampling of such books, one could mention The French, mentioned above, Peyrefitte's Le Mal Francais, The Frenchman and the Seven Deadly Sins, by Diaz-Plaja, and Barzini's The Italians. University libraries are replete with stimulating and informative books of this kind.

Foreign newsmagazines and newspapers can provide immediacy in the study of contemporary life, especially by providing the results of opinion polls, through articles on sociological topics, and through the columns of journalists who regularly comment on political and social trends within their country. Again, like films, these sources almost certainly require interpretation by knowledgeable professors.

A desideratum of serious cultural studies is that students should go abroad for a period of time, to meet people, to study, to see, in order to form their own conclusions and to integrate their studies into a personal summary of what it is that constitutes the culture of another nation. An ideal curriculum would include a program of study abroad.

From a course structured around these varied sources of information, it may be possible at least to make an approach to the volksgeist that Gramont sought. It may not be evident to most students that an American, speaking English, may have very

different ways of thinking from his English cousin; likewise, that a Québecois may have little in common with the average Frenchman, that an Argentine may feel more at home with Italians and Frenchmen than he does with a North American or even a Mexican. Our task in developing civilization components of our language programs is to attempt to convey to our students what it is that makes us American, French, Italian, Russian, Argentine, Cuban, Japanese. The task is formidable, but I believe it to be an indispensable goal of any present-day language program to try to convey to our students those elusive qualities which make nations differ in their ways of life.

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Date Filmed

March 29, 1991